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World Cup: Are Spain boring?

July 8th, 2010, by Mark Chalcraft

Three knockout matches, three 1-0 wins. A preference for patient ball retention over "bodies in the box". A lack "out & out wingers" pinging over cross after cross.

If you're used to watching Spurs or Manchester United, you might think this is all a bit one-dimensional. You know, in the same way that Arsenal always want one pass too many, or just aren't ruthless enough.

But does this make it boring? Alan Shearer certainly thought so at half time of Spain's semi-final victory over Germany. Ok, so perhaps Shearer is not the best example of insightful punditry that we could call upon.

Barney Ronay recently [wrote on this subject](#):

But still the feeling persists that this is an oddly frictionless excellence; that Spain play a kind of platinum-selling dinner party football - Coldplay Football - that is clearly and undeniably high spec, but also devoid of jarringly revelatory spikes and twists. Playing against Spain must feel a little like playing a chess computer: strangled, impotent, you gawp helplessly at its robotic grace.

There is certainly a defensive aspect to much of what Spain do under Vicente del Bosque. By retaining so much of the possession, they protect themselves. Attack is not necessarily the best form of defence any longer.

The use of two holding midfielders, Xabi Alonso and Sergio Busquets, is a further insurance policy. It proved a very important part of stifling the German attacking threat, and Mesut Oezil in particular.

Safe in the knowledge that he had help, Busquets was able to shadow Oezil all over the pitch for most of the game.

Watching the Premier League and then watching Spain at this World Cup is likely to induce a culture shock. Not even Arsenal are able to control a game in the way that Spain can.

Partly this is due to the Premier League's frenetic style of play, and partly because Arsenal do not possess players like Xavi Hernandez or Andres Iniesta.

We are so used to watching a style of play that imitates pinball that anything else is dismissed as dull, boring.

But this is not really true. The fact is that you have to pay more attention, but if you truly study what Spain do, it is fascinating to watch.

During the first hour of the semi-final, Spain were content to control the play and limit the opposition. They were only playing at something like 75%, keeping Germany at arms length whilst still forcing them to use up their energy levels to keep them out.

After the sixty minute mark, Spain went up a gear. Their tempo increased, they became more incisive and almost immediately began creating chances. It was such a

distinct and immediate change that it could only have been deliberate.

Then they scored, oddly enough from a set piece. Game over. Spain have won 42 consecutive games in which they have scored first, an incredible sequence stretching over four years since [David Healy's hatrick](#) for Northern Ireland.

To think that not once in that period have they been pegged back by an equaliser and held to a draw is amazing. If they score first, they *will* win, it's as simple as that.

Yes, there is a machine-like quality to the level of performance that Spain so consistently produce, but that does not make it boring.

Yes, they will often string 20 passes together in midfield without looking particularly ambitious, but that does not make it boring either.

Spain regularly score beautiful goals, construct breathtaking passing combinations, draw intricate patterns all over the pitch.

It is their ability to do exactly this – to keep possession at will, regardless of the efforts of their opponents – that is so interesting to watch.

To say that the Spanish tiki-taka style is boring compared to the kick and rush stylings of English football is akin to saying that Vivaldi is boring compared to Arctic Monkeys. It all depends on how you listen.

Occasionally Spain are beaten, as against Switzerland, by a resolute defense and an unlucky goal. One day they will either find themselves against an opponent who figures out how to dominate them, or they may simply fade back into the masses as all great teams do.

But if Spain win this World Cup to add to their European title, they will be remembered as one of the very greatest teams, the apotheosis of current tactical trends.

Predictable, maybe, but certainly not boring.

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Everton: Spot the Gosling

July 7th, 2010, by Mark Chalcraft

Gosling (noun):

1) A young goose;

2) A foolish, inexperienced person;

By now you'll have heard the news, especially if you're a Liverpool fan. In failing to offer a new contract in writing, Everton have left a loophole that allows Dan Gosling to leave the club for nothing.

Being only 20, Everton would normally expect to receive compensation if Gosling were to reject a contract offer

and leave, but a Premier League inquiry has ruled that this no longer applies. Technically, Gosling is considered to have been released by the Toffees.

With the laughter of English football ringing in their ears, Everton would be forgiven for feeling like goslings themselves.

Yet, according to the [Liverpool Echo](#), the club are furious that their young goose has engineered the situation by refusing to hold contract talks. Leaving for nothing is to his advantage because he can now demand a huge signing on fee.

Apparently, Gosling would prefer a club who will let him play regularly in his favoured central midfield role – unlikely at Everton, who boast Arteta, Cahill, Fellaini, Osman and so on – with Newcastle, Sunderland and West Ham all possible destinations.

It all carries the unmistakeable stench of player power + greed = chaos.

Everton seem to be a club beset by ill-fortune after injury problems last season and their perennial inability to compete on a level financial footing with their rivals.

So is it the work of a Machiavellian midfield genius looking for a big payday, or is it just that Everton have lost the plot?

Actually, the answer is probably both.

Will this be the first of many such cases? We could end up with desperate clubs hiring private detectives to hunt down their elusive quarry and forcibly serve them with a written contract offer.

Meanwhile, greedy players cower in secret hotel rooms while their Mr. 15% tries to ensure that their whereabouts remains unknown.

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World Cup: Uruguay, Ghana, Suarez

July 3rd, 2010, by Mark Chalcraft

This was the end of the World Cup. I had no choice. I have the 'Hand of God' now.

I did it so that my teammates could win the penalty shoot-out. When I saw Gyan miss the penalty it was a great joy.

So said Luis Suarez in the aftermath of his goalline “save” and Ghana’s subsequent penalty miss.

Not entirely unpredictably there was uproar across ‘t interweb after Uruguay won the penalty shoot out, with many people wanting changes to the rules to introduce the automatic award of a goal without resorting to a penalty kick.

Whatever your opinion on the definition of cheating, upon which subject there was also much debate – for what it's worth my view is that Suarez did cheat and was punished as an individual, but Uruguay as a team benefited from it – these knee-jerk calls for sweeping reform are tugging on the lid of a can of especially wriggly worms.

Whilst the Suarez Interdiction (© Robert Ludlum) was a clear cut case of the deliberate prevention of a certain goal by foul means, where should the line be drawn?

Do we introduce an automatic goal for any goalline handball or do we require the referee to make a judgement of intent?

How do we deal with the handball in front of the post? The ball might go in, it might rebound into the path of an attacker, it might go out of play. Does the referee now have to judge this or do we introduce technology to assist?

Does it have to be right on the goalline to trigger the award of a goal? What about 2 yards in front? Ten? The other defender on the line might have blocked it legally.

In a perfect world there would be perfect justice. But football is anything but a perfect world. Neither is it a court of law, rather a mere game taken too seriously for it's own good.

If it were either of these things then Uruguay's Sebastien Abreu would have been awarded a penalty about 10 minutes prior after an obvious trip by Paintsil.

Suarez certainly prevented a goal, but he did not prevent Ghana from winning – they missed 3 out of 5 penalty kicks when scoring just that first effort would have done the job.

What is done is done. Suarez may forever be remembered for that moment, as a hero in Montevideo, as a villain in Accra.

Tragic though it may have been for Ghana, perfect justice is an impossible ambition, and no amount of rule changes will solve that.

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The unbearable lightness of Woy?

June 30th, 2010, by Mark Chalcraft

It's safe to say that the appointment of Roy Hodgson at Liverpool is provoking a heated debate and mixed reaction amongst the club's fans.

After the car crash that was last season, and the ongoing civil war surrounding Hicks & Gillett and the club finances, the departure of Rafa Benitez and the speculation of a mass exodus amongst the playing squad, it was vital that Liverpool chose wisely. Have they done so?

Hodgson is, without doubt, a safe pair of hands, with a good track record of improving the fortunes of struggling sides. This includes Inter, who were to win the UEFA Cup the season after he left, and in part due to the rebuilding work he had done.

The same is true at Fulham, who were staring relegation in the face when Woy took charge. After a shaky start they rallied, survived on the last day and have never looked back.

But Hodgson's detractors will point to an absence of major trophies – last season's Europa League final was the closest he has come – and his troubled spells in charge of Blackburn Rovers and Udinese.

This isn't entirely fair. Relatively little of his career has been spent in major European leagues, and his time at clubs like Malmo FF and FC Copenhagen were successful.

Blackburn were a club who were being rapidly left behind by the new finances of the Premier League, and surely any manager is bound to have a bad experience at least once in their career. Udinese was a bad fit.

It will pain Liverpool fans to realise it, but their club is at a crossroads. The financial problems caused by the leveraged buyout of Hicks and Gillett, and the problems with the new stadium that have resulted, have set the club back by a number of years.

Rafa Benitez was no expert in the transfer market, and Liverpool do not have the resources to waste.

A safe pair of hands like Hodgson could be just the thing they need to see them through a difficult period.

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World Cup: The English Inquisition

June 28th, 2010, by Mark Chalcraft

As the feed from the BBC News channel switched to the FA's press conference room, the greatest surprise was that the media hadn't hastily constructed a gallows.

Certainly Fabio Capello must have felt he was about to be read his last rites by the assembled hacks, one of whom pathetically asked whether he thinks he is worth the salary the FA decided to offer him.

It was a brief encounter, of the kind that will have the journalists further sharpening the knives. If there is one thing that angers them more than a defeat to Germany at a World Cup it is to be left wanting more from the England manager.

Biting the hand that will eventually plunge a knife into your back aside, two things were evident from the replies Capello gave in response to the questions asked of him.

Capello wants to continue as England manager

Whatever you think of Capello's mistakes at this World Cup, it is impossible to argue against his pedigree or track record.

Many are calling for Harry Redknapp or Woy Hodgson or even Big Sam to be given the job, entirely on the basis of their being English.

These arguments ignore the facts that 'Arry and Woy are both staunch 4-4-2 men, precisely the main criticism being hurled at Capello, and Allardyce plays the exact type of "traditional" English football that has been shown to be outdated again and again over the last decade.

To suggest that they would do a significantly better job than Capello is akin to suggesting that Emile Heskey is a proven goalscorer.

So to hear Capello say that he wants to continue, that he enjoys the job, is good news. He also talked about bringing younger players into the team, which is even better.

Tiredness was a big factor

Capello made several references to the players being tired during the World Cup as a result of the domestic season. He called for the introduction of a winter break.

It is very instructive to hear him say that "I understand much more about the problems after this tournament".

Many people have criticised Capello for abandoning his pledge to select only on the basis of fitness and form. I think that such criticism is unfair.

Before taking up the post and completing an exhaustive study of his available resources Capello simply overestimated what he had to work with and, more crucially, underestimated the toll that a Premier League campaign takes from those players.

So the ball is now firmly in the FA's court to take the big decisions that will set the England team on the path to success.

Except it isn't.

The man who will be taking two weeks to decide on Capello's future – hardly a vote of confidence, by the way – is the chairman of the FA's International Committee.

He is also the chairman of the Premier League.

Arise, Sir Dave

The introduction of a winter break would not be good for Premier League finances, which is why there isn't one in place already.

Club fans like the holiday fixtures in December and view them as a sacred tradition in England's football calendar. As a result these fixtures attract bumper revenues.

So we are now asking the chairman of this venture, Sir Dave Richards, to vote for Christmas and knowingly persevere with a man who has publicly called for it.

If Sir Dave and his many conflicts of interest do not embody all that is rotten within English football then I don't know what does. Oh, and you might ask a Sheffield Wednesday fan about the legacy he "bestowed" upon the Owls.

What will actually happen

The next couple of weeks will be spent "taking stock" according to Adrian Bevington, the FA's media relations guru.

I suspect what this actually means is "sounding out potential replacements" [see the aforementioned list] and "having our lawyers negotiate Fabio's payoff".

I would be delighted to be proven wrong, but I doubt I

will be.

As far as the gutless, incompetent FA are concerned, this is the path of least resistance. The media are already turning on Capello, with all the rumours about player discontent to help them on their way.

It will be the work of a moment for the FA to nurture that mood and convince the nation that the manager has "lost the dressing room" before "reluctantly" negotiating terms.

Expect to hear plenty of "sources close to" and "consulting senior figures within the dressing room" – i.e. John Terry – over the next fortnight.

If this does occur then all it will prove is that English football really does need to be saved from itself. But by whom?

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June 30th 2010

Roy Hodgson will be unveiled by Liverpool as their new manager tomorrow. Amongst Liverpool fans, there will not likely be much fanfare to greet his arrival.

How do you think he will perform?

At Liverpool, Roy Hodgson will...

- ☐ bring back the glory years
- ☐ tread water
- ☐ sell Gerrard & Torres
- ☐ sign rubbish Scandinavians
- ☐ make things worse
- ☐ not last the season

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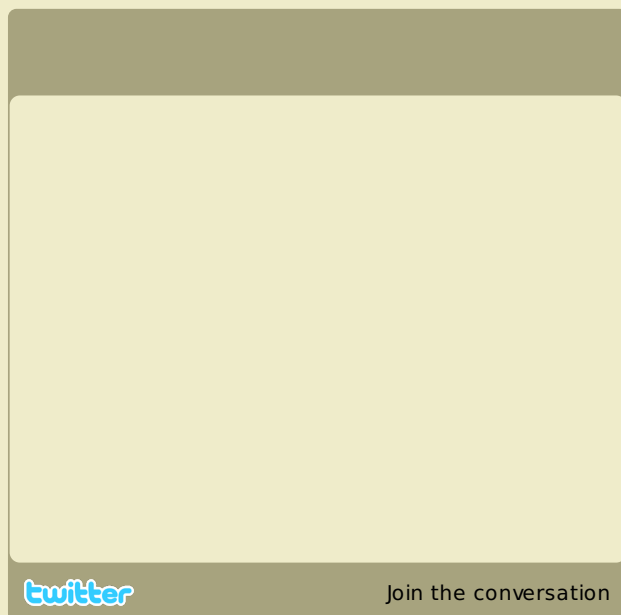
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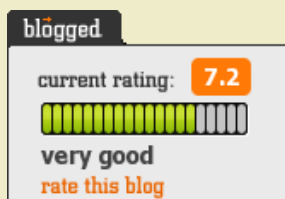
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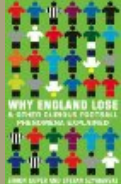
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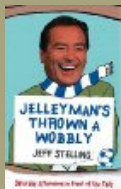


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